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PUBLIC LANDS IN POPULIST TIMES: AN INTERVIEW WITH RAÚL GRIJALVA

Representative Raúl Grijalva of Arizona is staunchly progressive and deeply committed to protecting public lands.

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Representative Raúl Grijalva of Arizona is a standout figure on Capitol Hill. First elected to Congress in 2002, he currently serves as both the co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus as well as the ranking Democratic member of the House Committee on Natural Resources. From this powerful perch, Grijalva seamlessly blends a firm fealty to public lands and wildlife with a broader progressive political agenda. Whether out on the streets, in the courtroom or in Congress, he and his allies promote a populist vision of natural resource conservation in the United States and resolutely push back against the ongoing right-wing assault on land and wildlife.

Grijalva spoke with *Pacific Standard* about our country's conservation legacy while at home in Arizona during the recent Congressional recess.

My understanding of public lands history is that they were established, at least in part, during the Progressive Era. They were born out of a struggle that pitted progressives like Teddy Roosevelt against the mining magnates, cattle barons, and other organized commercial interests of the American West. Given that history, what role do you think the public lands play today in limiting the power of the wealthy and promoting equality among all Americans?

I have said it this way, OK: Regardless of who you are, what color you are, how much money you make, what zip code you live in, every American owns a little bit of the public lands. In terms of ownership and responsibility, it is equalized across the board. There is no one interest that, because of money or influence or connection, controls the public lands. They are shared by all the taxpayers of this country. They each have a little piece.

So, I think in terms of our democracy, the public lands are one of the greatest examples of what is egalitarian about this country. They are a shared value and a shared responsibility. For our democracy that is key. And [the public lands] are even more important now when you have [President Donald] Trump and the powers that be, both in the House of Representatives and the Senate, trying to redefine what our democracy is, trying to make the public lands the property of some and not of others. There is a clash. It is a clash around the public lands as a symbol of our democracy and our representative form of government.

We are witnessing a concerted effort by right-wing pressure groups, including organizations aligned with the billionaire Koch brothers, to weaken our conservation system, undermine laws like the Endangered Species Act, and hand over huge tracts of federal land to state and local control. What do you think motivates these right-wing forces to attack public lands and wildlife conservation?

There are two motives. One is the profit motive, the bottom line. There are resources on the public lands that are going to help the bottom line of the corporations and individuals and companies involved. On a political level, it is also about doing away with the idea of shared ownership. To them, everything has to belong to somebody as opposed to everybody.

So it is a combination of things: There is the profit motive, beyond anything. And then there is the symbolism I just mentioned: [The public lands are] something shared by everybody. They are not controlled by a few. So [the attack on them] is about ratcheting up this idea that if you are rich and powerful in this country you have privileges that nobody else has. To some extent, one of the things that stands in the face of that ideology are the public lands that are owned by everybody. It's as simple as that.

What can ordinary people do to fight back against this anti-conservation agenda?

In all honesty, one of the things that often happens in D.C. is that the environment and the public lands never really rise to the level of other issues. And so we don't adequately prepare for those fights. I think we are trying to do so and we are much more prepared than we used to be, but my point is that we have got to raise the profile of this issue. People that love the public lands, people that see them as part of our American legacy, people that use the public lands, people that want to protect wildlife and species, they have to go beyond commiserating about what is going on and talk directly to their elected officials, regardless of whether they are a Republican or a Democrat. Hearing from the public, knowing what the public wants, rallying around efforts to push back [against the anti-conservation agenda], I think that is key right now.

Internally within the Democratic Party, what we are arguing—what I am arguing—is that the environment is a profile issue with a great deal of public support. The public lands have a great deal of public support. The majority of Americans do not want the federal government to give the public lands to the states or the counties. The majority of Americans support the Land and Water Conservation Fund and want it re-authorized permanently. The majority of Americans believe there is climate change and don't deny it. The majority of Americans believe there are special places that should not be touched by development. The list goes on.

So public opinion is on our side. But it is a matter of raising [public lands] to a profile where it becomes a political issue that has consequences for those who choose to undercut public opinion. That is the next step we need to take.

In Montana's special congressional election right now, Democrat Rob Quist is running on a strong pro-public-lands platform and it seems to be resonating strongly with voters there. Do you see public lands conservation as an increasingly important campaign issue in the West?

Absolutely. And you know the allies that have come forth from the [recreation] industry, from hunters, from anglers, from people who care about historical and cultural preservation, and from Native Americans across this land, it's clear the [conservation] ethic is strong among the American people. It is a matter of tapping it and making sure that we raise that voice of support for it. That is the task ahead in the next few months, because we are going to face these fights and the only way to turn it around is ... in the realm of public opinion.

You have said that you will be keeping a close eye on Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke in the coming years. What specifically are some of the issues you're watching for?

The [mining] moratorium around the Grand Canyon will be huge. I think it will be what his opinion is on the use of the Antiquities Act. I think it will be [his opinion] on the National Environmental Policy Act and forest management, even though he shares that responsibility with the secretary of agriculture. I think [re-authorizing] the Land and Water Conservation Fund is another issue coming up. And then his response to Representative Rob Bishop's decision to put \$50 million in the budget—phony money—to pay for transferring land to states or counties. Every secretary that I have had to deal with has an opinion and recommendation on [these kinds of issues] and that is where the test will come.

Earlier this month you, along with the Center for Biological Diversity, sued the Trump administration over its plans to further militarize the U.S.-Mexico border and build a new wall there. Can you briefly explain the lawsuit and what you hope to accomplish with it?

[Our lawsuit is] just saying to the Department of Homeland Security, as a federal agency, as the largest federal law enforcement agency in the country by four fold, that it is required under the NEPA to do an environmental impact statement and analysis. [It is required] to study what the impact of a 2,000-mile wall, what the additional road ways, staging areas, construction areas, the additional ICE and border patrol agents, will be.

So we are asking them to follow the law, to do that analysis so that we have in front of us the consequences. And then, if members of Congress want to follow Trump down a \$22 billion rabbit hole in terms of the wall and all this, then they will have the facts in front of them. And, more importantly, the public [will have the facts in front of them], because NEPA is a transparent public process. I think they will come to the quick realization that there will be [negative impacts] to wildlife, water, habitat, land, and adjacent communities all along the border that there is no mitigation for and no other option for.

Do you suspect an environmental impact statement like that would take a lot of time?

Yeah. I think the question is: Would this slow [the wall] down? I hope so.

Finally, if you had a few sentences to describe why America's conservation system is so crucial to the health of our democracy, what would you say?

It is shared ownership, a shared legacy. It gives identity to us. It is probably the best example of our democracy in that it is universal ownership for all Americans. It is not proprietary to one individual or one company or one political party. For that reason alone it has survived the test of time. That ethic and that value—a democratic value, a democracy value—is its strongest asset.

And you know, normal folk aren't going to be able to say I love the public lands because they represent my democracy. But they are going to say that I love the public lands because I can use them, I can afford them, they are there and they are there for all of us. And, in some ways, that's saying the same thing.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.